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Report: Most fast-food chains aren't making the grade on antibiotic policies

Chris Dall, MA, November 21, 2024
Topics: Antimicrobial Stewardship

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A new report suggests most US fast-food and fast-casual restaurant chains have made little progress on efforts to reduce antibiotic use by their meat and poultry suppliers.

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Of the 20 restaurant chains reviewed in the **Serving Up Superbugs** report, which grades the chains based on antibiotic use policies in the meat they serve, only Chipotle and KFC received A grades for having meaningful policies for all types of meat they serve. Five chains received a C grade, six a D grade, and five received an F.

The report, produced by Food Animal Concerns Trust and Keep Antibiotics Working, awards policy points to restaurant chains that prohibit their meat suppliers from using medically important antibiotics for disease prevention—a practice the groups believe is irresponsible and contributes to the emergence and spread of antibiotic-resistant bacteria. The chains must have acceptable policies for all types of meat they serve to receive a high score.

"Disease prevention refers to administering antibiotics to animals before a disease has been diagnosed in order to prevent an anticipated disease—often created by unhealthy conditions under which animals are raised," the groups wrote. "We want animals to be raised in healthy conditions where antibiotic use is rare."

The groups determine the grades for each restaurant chain by directly surveying the companies and reviewing company websites, annual reports, and other publicly available information on antibiotic use policies.

Restaurant sector 'moving in the wrong direction'

The report found that, while 15 chains have implemented meaningful policies to limit the use of medically important antibiotics in their chicken supply, most had no policies governing antibiotic use in their beef, pork, or turkey supply chains. Taco Bell, which received a C grade, raised its grade from previous reports by committing to reducing medically important antibiotics in their beef supply chains by 2025.

> **We want animals to be raised in healthy conditions where antibiotic use is rare.**

Furthermore, some chains have taken a step back from previous commitments on antibiotics. Panera, for example, was downgraded from an A to a D because they no longer adhere to serving "raised without antibiotics" chicken, turkey, and pork or buying beef from suppliers who limit the use of antibiotics. Similarly, the report criticizes McDonalds for backtracking on a **2021 commitment** to reduce antibiotic use in its beef supply. The company now says it's committed to responsible antibiotic use.

The report also found that many restaurant chains are still failing to track and report the use of antibiotics in the beef, pork, and turkey they buy, while only 7 of 20 use a third party to verify that they are complying with their antibiotic use policies.

"The impact of company action is clearly illustrated in the chicken sector, which has significantly lowered its use of antibiotics," the report concludes. "Unfortunately, as illustrated in this report, the restaurant sector as a whole is moving in the wrong direction with some of the largest companies reversing earlier policies that stopped overuse."

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